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ABSTRACT

At present, television production curriculum is too often confined to a token course or two, with content limited to the efficient operation of equipment and facilities and to routine producing and directing techniques. So that each course might integrate all of the elements involved in production, the number of required courses should be expanded to four or six. Each of the courses offered should build on the preceding one, in complexity and sophistication. Each course should include units in five areas: (1) equipment and facilities, in order to develop operational skills; (2) the organizational, administrative, and leadership roles in television production; (3) visual language, aesthetics, and television grammar; (4) practice in communicating human experience, relevant insights, and valid truths about our complex society, through the television medium; and (5) content areas that have some instructional, cultural, or social insights and values. (MAI)

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A CASE FOR TELEVISION PRODUCTION

Thomas O. Olson - November, 1977

Introduction

As Pogo once said, "we have met the enemy and he is us." To some extent, Broadcast Education is responsible for the state of television programming today. It has been said that Broadcast Education should return to a greater study of humanistic, liberal arts courses with a deemphasis on the vocational aspects of our curriculum. It has also been said that Broadcast Education in higher education should offer more than a token course or two in television production. The two statements are not as divergent as they might first appear. Both can be adhered to in Broadcast Education.

The problem is that television production has been considered too narrowly, confining it to efficient operation of equipment and facilities and routine producing and directing techniques. In instructional control rooms all over the country bright students are directing final projects. All their energy and attention are on the proper handling of the equipment of the production making sure that the gadgetry is being operated correctly which is at best unpracticed. There is little concern for the aesthetic values of staging and lighting, field of view, point of view or camera composition, the grammar of editing, the performance of talent, let alone concern for cultural, instructional or social values in programming content. These are bright young people who have worked hard but have been denied sufficient instruction in the use of this complex medium of their chosen profession.

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Those of us who refer to television production as mere "button punching," are perpetrating a self-fulfilling prophecy, making it thus by the number of courses we offer and what we include in those courses, when, in reality, production in its largest sense, is the heart and soul and brain of television, if not the pocketbook of our industry.

Broadcast Education Curricula in higher education should have from four to six courses in television production depending on whether the curriculum is operated under the semester or the quarter system. And each of the courses should integrate all of the elements of television production, increasing the complexity and sophistication of the lecture content, readings and laboratory projects as students progress through the courses.

Television production courses should include units in (1) equipment and facilities, but should also include units in (2) organizational, administrative and leadership roles, in (3) our rich tradition of visual language and aesthetics as well as television grammar, in (4) stimulating a desire in our students to develop this unique, virtually unexplored medium, potentially more capable than most in communicating ideas and emotions, and, indeed, units should be included that (5) explore potential content areas that do have some instructional, cultural, or social insights and values.

Equipment and Facilities

Instruction should begin with the operation of equipment in order to provide as much time as possible to develop skill with its use. There should also be sufficient laboratory time for this objective in each course. We have all felt that "so brief were class meeting times in proportion to what should be learned that most of them were consumed not

by absorbing principles of communication, but by getting accustomed to briefing crews and talent, calling shots, watching monitors and bringing the show off on schedule."[1] These are necessary activities and sufficient lab time should be provided. As children, our earliest training was how to say words and how to operate a pencil. Much time was spent in this early training and we are still at it. Why not so with the tools of visual language? Enrollment in these laboratories should be sufficiently small so that there is rarely a student waiting for something to do.

More efficient use of laboratory time can be achieved with plenty of handouts and self-instructional videotape modules on the specifics of the equipment at hand, freeing up lecture time and outside study time for more advanced elements of production early in the sequence, even the first course. How often have we heard students say, "Oh, that's a snap course; lotsa time in the lab but not much homework at all."

Initial projects should be relatively simple and increase in complexity, moving, perhaps, from simple interviews through newscasts and demonstrations to dramatic vignettes. This simplicity also makes it possible for the students to begin to apply the organizational and creative aspects of producer-director techniques and rudimentary aesthetic principles early in the sequence of courses.

Organization, Administration, and Leadership

As soon as equipment and facilities training is operating pretty much on its own, work should begin on the organizational, administrative and leadership responsibilities of television production. The importance of these units cannot be stressed enough. Television production is so complex in terms of personnel and equipment that without efficient organization and thoughtful leadership, the program objectives will rarely be reached.

At the same time, it must be stressed that this is not the end but only the essential means to a successful production. Efficient organization is necessary only to provide more time, attention and energy to the creative application of aesthetic principles to communicate the desired information or insights.

Nonetheless, script writing, floorplans, talent selection and rehearsal, set design, graphics preparation, studio setup, rehearsal schedules, and use of production time all require preplanning, organization and leadership. "Directing, finally, means to guide with sureness, understanding, and compassion; to guide and coordinate a great number of people and events into a coherent whole; into video and audio messages that ultimately affect the percipient in a positive way."[2] A great deal can be learned here about self-discipline as well as the methods of disciplining others, both of which are of value in themselves and contribute to the ultimate goals of higher education which are understanding and judgment.

We do a reasonable, elementary job of teaching equipment and practical producer-director responsibilities, but the teaching-learning often ends here because we do not have enough time to proceed to the more sophisticated areas of television production.

Visual Language

Not many television production people really know why their programs have impact or how much greater that impact could be if they were aware of and applied our rich tradition of visual aesthetics. "In building his vocabulary for a language of the television medium, Zettl used the perceptual, compositional, and aesthetic theories of other art forms--painting, theater, film, music--and has established a foundation for the study of television aesthetics."[3]

From a long tradition of painting comes the study of basic visual materials: line, color, mass, and space. From a long tradition of dance and theater comes the study of their application in setting, costuming, and makeup united by lighting and the visual considerations of staging, movement, and performance to say nothing of the potential for the expression of ideas and emotions through human speech. From a long tradition of music comes the study of the temporal considerations of rhythm, and melody and the sound considerations of loudness, pitch, and tone color. From a long tradition of film comes the study of temporal and spatial freedom through modifying field of view, point of view, optics, camera movement and editing.

To teach the equipment and organizational skills that we learned as commercial production people, and have taught our young instructors who are perpetuating the insufficiency is not enough.

> A thorough understanding of aesthetic principles, and their prudent use, is no longer a matter of choice; it has become an essential prerequisite for the responsible communicator. In the midst of the extreme pollution of our senses and widespread insensitivity, if not illiteracy, aesthetics may well emerge as one of the most important and effective means of personal and social stability, if not survival.[4]

Nor is it enough to simply pay lip service to television aesthetics and dismiss it to theory and appreciation courses. The aesthetic approach to media study must be an integral part of our production courses through the sequence devoting laboratory time to applying aesthetic concepts.

This will raise television production above the level of vocational "button punching," and, perhaps, contribute to the return and surpassing of the excitement and experimentation of the Golden Age of television. Referring to the commercial killing of television experimentation, Bill Bluem wrote,

> Only later, when the medium began to dominate the time and attention of an entire population, did the regretting begin. Only later did the artist discover the hard fact that in an age of instantaneous mass communication he was merely another vested interest in the fight for that most precious of all commodities--the attention of an entire civilization. With that discovery, the Golden Age was over. It is a tribute to him, and to a much maligned medium, that the right still rages.[5]

The fight will only be won when we begin to dig more deeply into television production than equipment and organization.

> To be an artist in any medium presupposes that we go beyond the everyday perceptual reflexes, that we approach creative problems with an educated perception and a certain degree of emotional literacy. When working with a specific medium such as television or film, we must become sensitive, not only to our general environment but also to the aesthetic requirements and potentials of the medium. It is not enough to have a significant vision. We must also learn to give to significant vision significant form so that it can be shared with our fellowman. If not communicated, a significant vision remains an insignificant dream. After all, sharing one's significant vision with his neighbor is a fundamental responsibility of man. For a professional communicator and artist, such sharing is his duty.[6]

We must begin to teach that to communicate significant experiences, visions, insights, and information, our students must not only observe life but also effectively clarify, intensify and interpret that observation through television. We must teach them about the aesthetic variables of light, color, line, space, mass, sound, time, motion and rhythm, the basic matter and formal principles that have given expression to significant vision in visual media, except television, for years.

With this skill goes a great deal of responsiblity that we must also communicate to our students.

> This is especially essential when we manipulate someone's feelings, his emotions, and ultimately, his behavior. Most often, the recipient of our . . . message is not even aware of being, at least partially manipulated. There is relatively little difference between the anesthetized patient on the operating table and the aesthetically unaware television or film viewer. Both persons can do very little about what is happening to them . . .

> Obviously the surgeon who cuts into human beings with his scalpel, and we who cut into human beings with highly charged, keenly calculated aesthetic energy, have an equally grave responsibility . . . . Skill alone is not enough. First and foremost, he must bring to his job a genuine concern for his fellow human beings. He must want to make them more aware of themselves and their surroundings. He must love them.[7]

This will be no easy task. We will have to overcome our own limitations and biases as well as our whole educational experience and tradition.

> Our entire education system continues to be based on the study of words and numbers . . . More and more the arts are considered as a training in agreeable skills, as entertainment and release. As the ruling disciplines stress more rigorously the study of words and numbers, their kinship with the arts is increasingly obscured, and the arts are reduced to a desirable supplement; fewer and fewer hours of the week can be spared from the study of subjects that, in everybody's opinion, truly matter. By the time the competition for college placement becomes acute, it is a rare high school that insists on reserving for the arts the time needed to make their practice at all fruitful. Rarer still is the institution at which a concern with the arts is consciously justified by the realization that they contribute indispensibly to the development of a reasoning and imaginative human being. The educational blackout persists in college, where the art student is considered as pursuing separate and inferior skills. The arts for which the bachelor and the master are certified do not yet include the creative exercise of the eyes and hands as an acknowledged component of higher education.[8]

At the same time, if television is to improve and communication is to keep up with an increasingly complex society, we must get at the task.

> If the invention of movable type created a mandate for universal literacy, surely the invention of the camera and all its collateral and continually developing forms makes the achievement of universal literacy an educational necessity long overdue. Film, television, visual computors are all modern extensions of the designing and making that has historically been a natural capability of all human beings and now seems to have been isolated from human experience. Art and the meaning of art, the form and the function of the visual component of expression and communication, have changed sharply in the technological age without a corresponding shift in the aesthetics of art.[9]

The task may be difficult but it is also essential. Television aesthetics must be taught in television production classes and those classes must be expanded to include the material.

There are a growing number of books which address themselves to these topics and which should be used in our courses. Zettl's Sight, Sound, Motion is obvious. The Dondis text, Primer of Visual Literacy is fine as are Arnheim's books, Visual Literacy and Art and Visual Perception, as well as the host of works in aesthetics, art, film and music in addition to our own production handbooks. These will serve as a basis for investigating more fully the expressive potential yet to be realized by this unique medium--television.

A Unique Medium Requiring Research

We also have an obligation to renew and surpass the excitement of exploration and experimentation with this unique medium that characterized the Golden Age of Television.

> Television is a medium with an immense future but almost no past. As a branch of broadcasting, it could draw at first on the experience of sound radio; as a picture medium it could derive initially some pointers in technique from cinema. But it was soon discovered that neither of these media was anything like the same as television, and that those dedicated to television had to create their own way of developing a medium which is in so many respects unique.[10]

> Knowledge of art composition, in painting, sculpture, music, theater and film, theories of visual perception, criticism, and aesthetics is warranted. Naturally, these are demands that force the teacher to go beyond the comfortable walls of the studio and control room. College instructors cannot afford to rely only on their professional experience, no matter what the level of the television production class they teach. Furthermore, they are confronted with the pressing need to stimulate students in the pursuit of empirical research studies that will test Zettl's theories.[11]

We as a discipline are still at the stage of alchemy. We are scribblers. It is alarming at this early stage of development that we should . . . invite a kind of respite from the social turmoil and rapid change inherent in our field. We, as scholars, have barely begun our tasks.[12]

It is imperative that we participate and stimulate our students to participate in this exciting research potential for discovering and utilizing a grammar for this unique medium--television, which can then better address itself to the cultural needs and social problems of our increasingly complex age.

A Concern for Content

Finally, we ought to stress from the very start the importance of content in our laboratory exercises. Most of us are inclined to conceive of television production courses as solely ones of method--learning how to make programs--with little concern for their content. As a result, the bulk of the exercises are juvenile, amaturish and highly unprofessional attempts to do "take-offs" on all varieties of programs. The content as well as the execution of student projects ought to be evaluated. If it is impossible for the student to think of anything else to do, he ought to be encouraged to seek specialization in other areas.

It is imperative that the student be made aware that no matter how sophisticated their knowledge and application of television aesthetics, without having something significant to communicate, all their aesthetic awareness and skill is of little value.

Our students should be taught to become sensitive to the environment, to observe life, to recognize the intellectual, emotional, physical, spiritual, and aesthetic needs of their fellow human beings, and then

to effectively communicate their clarified, intensified and interpreted insights.

> The producer may be more highly educated, more specialized in his knowledge, certainly more aware of the technicalities of television than the majority of his audience, but these differences are small compared with what he has in common with them. As a human being the chances are that he reacts in the same way to external stimuli, only he must be more aware of his reactions. In this way he can identify himself with his audience. Second, he must have a visual imagination so that he can see in his mind's eye what he proposes to put on the screen and then . . . he must appraise the effectiveness of his programme in detail as a viewer, and modify it accordingly. If he is satisfied with what he sees, he has only to cope with the technical problems of realizing his "vision" on the screen. Granted the ability to identify himself with the viewer, and a visual imagination---the ability to envisage a succession of pictures on the screen with their accompanying sound--it follows that his technique will be good; he will have communicated.[13]

We must teach our students to meet the needs of our society. Television production can become a significant and contributive activity.

> No one could disagree with the observation that producing telementaries has become a serious and dedicated profession after seeing an accurate telementary indictment of inhumanity, or prejudice, or short-sightedness in public life or indifference in private individuals. As in any serious work which communicates the ideas, feeling and vision of the creative man, it is the aim of the telementary to reach the audience's intellects, their emotions, their sense of righteousness and humor--the sum total of their sensitivities. It should produce an emotional response from the viewer. What results from this depends on the intent of the presentation. Viewers may be aroused to action. They may develop a new personal insight into a subject or merely be made more aware.[14]

But something significant has been communicated. The aim was understanding, communicating human experience, essential insights and valid truths about our complex society. If stimulated, our students will have an opportunity to express--to practice communicating the relevant insights and content learned in humanities and liberal arts courses. It will make those insights more real for the student and develop their skill at communicating them.

> The new opportunity in the twentieth century is broadcasting in sound and vision, combined with recording on film and tape. This form of communication has arrived at a time when the whole pattern of civilization is changing and when the thinking that goes with this needs the widest possible dissemination. The Twentieth Century represents a new education era in human history.[15]

If the printing press was responsible to some degree for the socio-cultural explosion of Europe years ago, we are in the midst of another era of great human strides as a result of our new media. "The cultural and global force of film, photography and television in the shaping of man's image of himself defines the urgency of teaching visual literacy to both communicators and constituents."[16]

Granting that this expansion of television production is justified, can we accommodate our large number of students in this expanded curriculum, particularly when production jobs are so limited? And, further, can we justify all the course time, personnel and facilities we appear to require? We must, and we can, on the basis that first, only a small portion of our brightest students will meet the expectations of the final courses requiring sensitivity and concern for content and a more sophisticated aesthetic awareness thus limiting sections of advanced courses. Also, as the sophistication of the television viewer increases so will their demand for quality programming.

> It is also important for the viewer, because he will be able to experience television and film communication on several intellectual and emotional levels and to grow less and less susceptable to irresponsible persuasion. We all should attain a degree of emotional literacy and sophistication in media aesthetics that allows us to judge a television program or film with sureness and confidence.[17]

Summary and Conclusions

To summarize then, our television production courses should be expanded from four to six courses which (1) permit sufficient time to practice skills of equipment operation, (2) develop organization, administrative and leadership roles, (3) teach our rich tradition of visual language and aesthetics, (4) inspire a desire to further explore this unique medium through application and research and (5) consider communicating content that does have some instructional, cultural, or social insights and values.

> Telecommunications studies finds itself in the enviable position of being a satisfying and authentically liberalizing--or liberating--discipline in this technic-economic-theatric age. Radio-Television-Film studies achieve the traditional purpose of a broad, liberal education more aptly than many programs of literature, art, history, philosophy and such. Radio-TV-Film communications studies is the prototype of higher education in the eighties. The discipline presents benefits of a personal culture--practiced senses, a furnished mind, understanding and good judgment--perhaps even vision and leadership. We are ennunciating important educational values inherited from the attic of the old liberal arts mansion even through we were one of the first fields to move to the suburbs.[18]

To conclude, paraphrasing Zettl, if someone can be shaken loose from his perceptual complacency and made to see, feel, listen, and move about with heightened awareness and joy; if someone can be helped to find his way through the chaos of his daily experiences and to recognize and benefit from the significant ones; if someone can be helped to feel compassion for his fellowman and to share his experience with him in a clarified way; if someone can be helped to reach even a minimal degree of emotional literacy that contributes ultimately to self-awareness, self-respect, and love--then we have done our job.

Thus, we are the humanists of tommorrow if not today, if we do not conclude our efforts with equipment and organization.

To modify Pogo a bit, we have glimpsed the future and it is us.

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